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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: RELIGIOUS LEADERS DISCUSS THE MYRIAD
PROBLEMS OF "POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT"

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Sylvia R. Curran, reasons 1.4 (b)
) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: At a March 25 roundtable with leaders of minority religious groups that have been registered, the participants observed that registration is a threshold obstacle. Following registration, there remain myriad issues that continually pose challenges to their groups' ability to freely practice and share their beliefs. These include restrictions on the availability of religious literature, lack of clarity about the right to proselytize, and the ability of the religious group to own property. More fundamentally, these religious leaders noted the need for a dialogue with government officials with a genuine give and take. They also commented that the excessive bureaucracy and lack of transparency makes compliance with the government's requirements difficult and with very little expectation of a favorable outcome. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The roundtable, organized by Political Officer, was attended by representatives of the Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Bahai, Greater Grace Church, and International Church of Christ groups, all of whom have been registered by the government. It was noted by participants that having the leaders of registered groups meet together was useful because they face a different set of challenges from those groups still awaiting registration. The meeting, held in Post's Public Affairs Section, was informal and generated lively exchanges with all attendees contributing to the discussion.

CONCERNS ABOUT POSSIBLE REVISION TO RELIGION LAW

¶3. (C) All participants expressed concern about possible revisions to the current Law on Religious Organizations. Although they had no information about the nature of the changes that are being considered, they cited experience in the other Central Asian countries, all of whom had passed new laws on religion. Through their contacts with fellow believers in these countries, they observed that the new laws had resulted in greater restrictions on religious practice in some of these countries. Pastor Dmitriy Mungalov suggested it would be useful if the drafters of the revised law would meet with religious leaders and listen to their views.

¶4. (C) Local Councils for Religious Affairs (CRA) have no

non-Islamic representatives. It was suggested that they would not want to see another religious faith developing in their district. Pastor Vladimir Tolmachev said the local CRAs lack information and think Christianity is only for Russians. And, for the most part, there aren't any ethnic Russians living in these areas. Pastor Vasiliy Korobov said they need clarification from the government about what is allowed or prohibited regarding proselytizing. He said the authorities treat Islam as cultural, which suggests the view that ethnic Turkmen cannot convert to Christianity. However, Tolmachev pointed out that the law allows a person to change his/her faith.

RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION UNCLEAR

15. (C) Restrictions on religious education were discussed. Tolmachev recounted that his church offered a beginning course in Bible instruction. It served as a preparation for those wanting to pursue further studies abroad. Tax officials found out about the training and checked the church's financial records, with a focus on whether the church collected tuition for the course. Subsequently, the church received a warning from the CRA about conducting unauthorized religious education. Tolmachev pointed out the ambiguity that to offer "courses" is okay, but to call them a "Bible College" or training is prohibited. He opined that, the more they inform officials about church activities, the more problems and obstacles arise. It is easier if they just act on their own. Pastor Dmitriy Mungalov said his church conducts "training" but does not call it such and handles it

ASHGABAT 00000395 002 OF 003

as an internal church matter.

RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS LITERATURE "ABSURD"

16. (C) The difficulty of obtaining religious literature was acknowledged by all the participants. While bringing it into the country is forbidden, there is no specific list of forbidden titles. It was also unknown who handles the review of religious literature, until Tolmachev informed that there is a separate "censorship" committee that is not part of the CRA. Nothing is known about its members or qualifications. There is no transparency or information about this body, including how to contact it. Also, it is practically impossible to appeal its decision. Approvals, when received, appeared to be decided on a random basis. Mungalov suggested, to general agreement, that it was a question of an official's mood at the moment -- if he was in a good mood, an official could approve a request. Seventh Day Adventist leader Olga Holopova remarked that they have never received permission to import Bibles, although they have been able to bring in lesson books. Still, they could only receive a quantity equal to the membership of the church. Holopova said her church does not have enough Bibles and, one month ago, Bibles she was bringing after a trip to Almaty were seized. Tolmachev said his church had received about 50 Bibles officially. After ordering the Bibles, they had applied to the CRA with all the shipping details, asking that Customs clear the books. He also said they print out booklets internally for their own use, but do not make special purchases of high quality paper in order to avoid drawing attention to the printing. All participants supported the idea of an inter-faith religious bookstore where basic religious texts that had been approved would be available, instead of forcing people to be smugglers.

17. (C) A couple of participants mentioned that there is a list of religious leaders kept at the airport. Upon departure, it is noted when they will return. Upon return, their baggage receives close inspection and they are asked about books and CD-ROMs. Korobov mentioned that upon his return, Customs officials held his notebook computer for three weeks, not only wiping out all the files, but charging him for storage. Tolmachev pointed out that they can get anything on the Internet, calling such actions, such as

erasing the files, "absurd." The same materials that are widely available over the Internet or through satellite television channels are prohibited if printed on paper. It was also mentioned that an ordinary church member or businessman could likely pass through Customs with no special scrutiny, bringing the same type of literature. Bahai leader Naim Nadji noted that, thanks to the Internet, they at least have access to new materials. Tolmachev mentioned that CRA Deputy Chairman Gurbanov had acknowledged to him that the Customs Service has unqualified personnel. but said that this was not the CRA's problem.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS WANT DIALOGUE WITH THE GOVERNMENT

18. (C) Mungalov recalled that three years ago, the government organized a roundtable, but there was no dialogue, only "presentations." All interactions with the government tend to be by "command from the top down," with no exchange. He mentioned that a couple of years ago, there was a proposal for a roundtable from the religious leaders, but the government never responded. Tolmachev supported the idea of a dialogue, suggesting that there are a number of unresolved issues that could be clarified: registration of affiliated churches; importing or printing religious literature; the organization of "Bible Society" for education purposes; and the invitation of missionaries and foreign church leaders. Such a roundtable should include international observers, and especially local media, in order to spread awareness of the event, and print a public statement. He said the attitude of the government is that if the Islamic religious community is not ready to do something, then other groups are told they

ASHGABAT 00000395 003 OF 003

cannot do it. There is an idea that all religious groups must move forward together at the same pace.

WHAT DOES THE CRA DO?

19. (C) There is no transparency about the role and function of the CRA. One participant said that it was not clear what credentials its members and staff held. In theory, the CRA should provide expertise, for example, to advise Customs about whether a certain piece of literature is banned. In practice, Tolmachev said he'd never seen the CRA perform this role. Rather than a consultative or advisory organ, the CRA operates more as a "punishing" body. As soon as the churches inform the CRA about a planned activity, measures are taken to block it. This included charitable endeavors that, traditionally, religious believers have performed, such as visiting hospitals and homes for the elderly.

10. (C) The question of ownership of church property elicited a lively exchange. While all agreed there were problems, some highlighted difficulties with banking transactions that others had not encountered. All agreed that the process itself was a problem since all land is owned by the government. In order to obtain necessary approvals and design a structure, there were a lot of front-end expenses that would be wasted if the land is ultimately not provided. There was also no certainty that approval, once provided, wouldn't be revoked.

BIGGEST OBSTACLE IS MENTALITY WITHIN GOVERNMENT

11. (C) Nadji remarked that the biggest problem was that the government does not view their groups as friends, but rather as unneeded people. Groups are registered, but are not allowed to function. In the case of the Bahai, its collective leadership and lack of formal theological training does not correspond to some requirements of the Law on Religion, creating complications. While Nadji expressed appreciation for international efforts to promote religious freedom in Turkmenistan, he said they would rather see progress through mutual understanding with government officials rather than pressure. Holopova added that it is a systemic problem. When they meet with officials, the

officials have nothing against the group, but it is easier for them not to make a decision in order to provide "insurance" for themselves. On a personal level, they don't have problems and generally relations with the CRA and local officials are good. Personal relationships make it easier.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: As might be expected, the discussion focused on continuing difficulties faced by these religious leaders' respective groups, which one participant described as the problems of "positive development." Their difficulties are compounded by the risk-averse nature of the Turkmen bureaucracy, the generally uncharted waters in allowing diverse religious activities, and the official perception that all religious groups must advance in lockstep, despite their differing wants and needs. At the same time, one pastor mentioned that membership at his church's Mary branch is surging and had outstripped Ashgabat and another noted how much better the situation is currently compared to previous years. It seems that these leaders themselves put their finger on the next step needed to address their problems: the creation of a genuine, ongoing dialogue with appropriate government officials that could lead to resolution of some of these restrictions and misunderstandings. How to establish such a dialogue with an at best indifferent officialdom will be a challenge. If the working group that will revise the Law on Religion would agree to consult with leaders of minority religious groups, it would be a meaningful step in the right direction. END COMMENT.
MILES